ELI MEYERHOFF

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RADICAL STUDYING
FOR ANOTHER WORLD

AN INTERVIEW BY THE FINAL STRAW RADIO
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TFSR: *So I'm talking with Eli Meyerhoff, who just published this book Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World with the University of Minnesota Press. Eli can you introduce yourself, give us a little information about who you are, what you're working on, and the pronouns that you use?*

ELI MEYERHOFF: Yeah. So I'm Eli. Thanks for having me on the show. I use he/him pronouns. I'm currently working as academic staff, as an event planner at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. I've occupied a lot of different positions within universities: undergrad, grad student, adjunct instructor, I'm currently a staff person. I think that's relevant, just thinking about how most books written about universities are written from the perspectives of people who are in Professor positions, and especially tenured positions. So, I feel like my positions give me a pretty different perspective on it. Maybe a more critical perspective, in some ways.

TFSR: *I was gonna transition from that critical perspective to my first question that is about the source of the project that became this book. I'm hoping through our conversation we can unpack some of the ideas in your book. You say that the project came from a personal and a political experience, and you use this term from the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, 'snapping at the university', which sounds like a critical perspective. Can you tell us what the idea of snapping at university means and how that turned into this project, Beyond Education?*

EM: Yeah! I picked up that term from Sara Ahmed, a feminist scholar. I'll give a couple examples of snapping, and I'll say a little about my own experience snapping at the university. One example is: this person named Corey Menafee, in 2016, he was working as a service worker at Yale University in a building called Calhoun College. This window in the college, a stained glass window that depicted enslaved people of African descent, who are depicted as smiling, he decided that he couldn't take looking at that window anymore. He is himself, an African American person and just seeing that image every day at work, frustration over that built up over the years and he decided to smash it with a broom handle. That building was itself named after a slaveholder and settler colonist, John C. Calhoun.

He was charged with a felony after that and he resigned from Yale and gave interviews with the media. Through people getting pissed off about how Yale was treating him, Yale decided to drop the charges and rehire him. But they did so only with a gag provision, where Menafee wasn't allowed to

make any further public statements about that action. Yale's administration was trying to bury this controversy that Corey Menafee was raising. They claimed that the reason for giving him this gag provision was so that everybody could just move on, in the words of one of the administrators.

So that's one example. Another example is from Sara Ahmed herself, she snapped at her university after working there and building up frustration over many years. In 2016, she also decided to publicly call out the sexism of academia, especially sexual harassment of students by professors. So, she publicly called us out and decided to resign from the university. That was another example of snapping.

She gave a kind of theorizing of the snap. She said to resign is a tipping point, a gesture that becomes necessary because of what the previous actions did not accomplish. The actions that did not accomplish anything are not noticed by those who are not involved in the effort. So the action that spills the history, a snap, so that it falls out. There's a fallout it's deemed rash and she said, 'Well, maybe then I'm willing to be rash.' I was really inspired by her affirmative discussion of snapping. So, I took inspiration from that to write about my own experience of snapping in the university.

I'll say a little about that. I was a grad student for a really long time, about 10 years at the University of Minnesota. I felt a lot of pressure, contradictory kinds of pressures from academia. I felt this pressure to be competitive, to develop myself professionally, climb up the professional ladder, get a career compete, get a job. But at the same time, the number of secure jobs for academics was dwindling to almost nothing. So, now when I apply for jobs, there's like 200-300 people applying for 10-15 jobs in my field, political theory, every year. These really contradictory pressures that made me and my friends feel pretty crazy, we felt a lot of anxiety and depression, and yet talking about mental illness was stigmatized in grad school. That made me feel awful. Some of my friends felt even worse. One of my friends actually committed suicide in grad school. Seeing that happen and then seeing people try to bury that episode and continue to avoid talking about mental illness, that made me snap at the university.

After that, I got a lot more involved in organizing the universities. I eventually decided to use my dissertation to focus on the object of my snapping: the university itself. I wrote kind of critical dissertation about education and that eventually became my book. I'm trying to use this research as a way to spill the university's history. So, that's a little backstory on how my snapping led to my research and my book.

TFSR: *Yeah, the things that you talk about: we see the legacy of racism, the histories of racism that are tied into higher education institutions, along with the institution itself as a site of sexual violence and abuse that ends up taking a toll on the students. But over/against this, we have a general story of something that you call the 'romance of education' in your book and that's given to us as a story that solves a kind of crisis in the individual life. But also there's always this talk about the crisis of education. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how the romance of education works to cover over all the these violences that you just talked about?*

EM: Yeah. So, when I was trying to understand the University from a critical perspective, I went out and I read a lot of what other people were writing about universities from seemingly critical perspectives. There's a whole field called 'critical university studies' that focuses on university politics. But I was disappointed because most of these books about the University tended to give a kind of crisis narrative, or they portray the university's situation as a moral and analytical question or problem. Crisis narrative implies a kind of moral distinction between the past and the future and they ask the question, 'Where did we go wrong in the past? And how can we now use our superior expert knowledge to redress the problems of the past and narrate solutions to the crisis today?' Often, these narratives rely on a kind of nostalgia for a past good university that supposedly has been ruined in some way.

In these narratives, I feel they tended to use typical genres of storytelling, either a kind of Jeremiad story, which relies on this progressive narrative of a past good ideal university, like the public land grant university, for example, that has been lost over time. So it's a longing for a past ideal. Another narrative form genre is melodrama, portraying struggle between forces of good and evil. Often the good side is made up of professors themselves and sometimes students, sometimes administrators who believe in this public university ideal. And these good characters are in the melodrama are framed as struggling against bad forces, evil forces, often corporatizing forces from outside of the university like business interests. Sometimes corporate administrative forces within the university itself are portrayed as the evil forces that we need to struggle against, and are also the right wing conservative forces trying to attack the university.

So, I found in these Jeremiad and melodrama narratives, in all of them they tend to portray these stories with certain subjects, the good and bad characters, that themselves have been educated, or desire to be

educated, for the students desiring education, for the professors that they have been educated, and that they're defending this ideal of education. I found that all these narratives rely on a kind of romance of education itself. I mean romance in two senses: one that there romanticizing education and treating it as a ideal to be promoted and something to love; and in another sense, education itself is a romantic story, in the sense of the genre of romance where you have an individual who is struggling against certain challenges. Trying to overcome challenges as they climb up the ladder of the education system that is often kind of a vertical imaginary of climbing up the grades from K to 12, up to higher education and overcoming obstacles along the way. So in that sense, there's kind of a romance narrative built into stories about education.

My idea for the book was to try to combat those narratives, the crisis narratives, and the education romance narratives, to show how they've been constructed in certain ways that limit our imaginations for what's possible in university struggles. So, in my book, I give a kind of critical history of where those ideas about education and in crisis come from, and destabilize our subscriptions to them by showing them as historically constructed.

TFSR: *Yeah, the romance of the education, the way that you're describing it, it sounds like the story that we get told that education is our path to success, to taking position within the bourgeois world. It really individualizes, as you discuss, the experience of education and takes away from the structural issues that are at play.*

One of the things that you trace in your critical genealogy of education is this figure of the 'drop out,' which is the other side of the student who makes it through school. I thought that was a really important history to focus on and how it ties together with white supremacy and has racist underpinnings? Could you elaborate a little bit on how the drop out is used to help the romance of education be sold?

EM: Yeah. So ,stepping back a little, just to give a little my own personal investment in that question, I was a person who left high school early. I didn't complete high school on time. So, I could have been seen as a dropout. But instead, I went to college instead of finishing high school and I was seen as some kind of valued figure for going to college early. Yet, I didn't complete school at that time. But other people, young people (I should say that I'm a white cisgendered male who comes from a pretty bourgeois background) but working class Black and brown young people in the city where I grew

up have much higher rates of not completing school and they tend to be framed as dropouts in this kind of stigmatizing negative sense.

So having that experience when I was younger and noticing that contrast between how I was framed and how other school non-completers were framed, seeing that made me start to question this idea of the dropout. Then later in when I was in grad school, at one point after my friend, my grad school friend, committed suicide, I had a lot of trouble getting through grad school and when I was talking with some of my dissertation committee members one of them asked me if I was thinking of dropping out. I hadn't really been considering it at the time, but I felt kind of hailed by that framing and I wondered what political work that framing was doing. It seemed to kind of individualize responsibility for my possible trajectory of leaving school. In doing that, individualizing it, de-politicize the wider conditions of grad school and of academia and more broadly that might have been pushed me out, or that caused my friend to commit suicide. Was he a "drop out"? Seeing the deep politicizing effects of the dropout narrative made me want to understand where it comes from. What was the history behind this framing?

So, I did critical history critical genealogy of where that dropout idea comes from. I found that back in the 1950s, early 1950s, a majority of Americans started graduating from high school for the first time. But at that point, nobody was yet talking about school dropouts as a national problem. It wasn't until the early 1960s with the rise of the project of racial liberalism, that people started talking about dropouts as a national problem for the first time. So looking into the archives of where that narrative came from, I found that two big liberal capitalist organizations are really pushing that narrative: Ford Foundation and the National Education Association. They had a project called Project School Dropouts and they put lots of money into promoting this narrative to schools, local governments all around the country.

I tried to contextualize why these organizations are pushing this narrative and I found that they and liberal capitalists more broadly, were under threat from the right wing with anti communist witch hunts, McCarthyites, and from the left wing as well. From the anti colonial movement, from communists themselves, and from the anti racist civil rights movement, and also from migrants who weren't necessarily politicize one way or another but who were creating alternative ways of making real alternatives to liberal capitalists. Especially migrant African American migrants from moving from the South to northern and western cities.

In reaction to these challenges to liberal capitalism, the liberal capitalist organizations, the Ford Foundation, especially, pushed this narrative of "urban" problems. Talking about problems in inner cities in ways that were ostensibly colorblind in the sense that they didn't talk about race. So as a way to talk about urban problems without talking about structural racism. The Dropout Project was part of this urban problem narrative, it was part of the Ford Foundation's gray areas programs, which looked at domestic migration to the so called 'gray areas' between cities and the suburbs.

They avoided talking about racism, by instead focusing on this de-racialized figure of the migrant, which lumps together Black, brown, and poor white migrants together. They framed migrants as being culturally deprived, as a way to stigmatize them without talking about race. So, this drop out narrative was a way to talk about urban problems that really contrasted with more critical ways, more anti racist ways of talking about urban problems that are coming from civil rights movement, such as talking about white supremacy, and segregation, and inequality and the ways that capitalism was bound up with those forces.

So, yeah, I found that this drop out narrative was basically a tool for liberal capitalists to manage the crises that they were experiencing in the early 1960s as a way to reaffirm the liberal capitalist order of value. The narrative of the dropout has changed forms over the years under multiculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, and neoliberal multiculturalism. It's taken less culturally racist forms: like they tend not to talk about Black people as culturally deprived anymore, but they use even more coded language now. Like using the language of 'economically disadvantaged' and 'at risk' to talk about young people who seem to be susceptible to dropping out of school. But even this new language still has the de-politicizing function of directing attention away from structural racism and focusing on the relationships between individuals, schools, and communities, and families.

This school dropout narrative, this was kind of the first element of the education romance that I took a critical perspective on. But through this, I found that the school dropout narrative exemplifies a lot of the other key features of the education imaginary and this kind of vertical imaginary of an individual rising up to life trajectory. Above, through the vertical steps of education. Another element is the terrain of governance for expert led crisis management. Another element is the emotional economy of shame and pride and fear and anxiety where the dropout is associated with shame and the graduate is associated with pride. And finally, these binary figures

of educational waste, and educational value, where the dropout is a waste figure and the graduate is a valued figure.

The rest of the chapters in my book, I give more specific histories of those different elements of education. I should say that I see education, as what I call a mode of studying, in contrast with alternative modes of studying. I see this education based mode of studying is having emerged historically in reaction to threats from modes of world making better alternatives to capitalism and colonialism. So, I look at how each of these elements of education emerge and coalesced with other elements of education to create this symbiosis of the institution of education that we know today.

TFSR: *Yeah, that story about the Ford Foundation, for example, I think is really interesting because now we can associate Ford Foundation with funding diversity fellowships, but then they also have this other history. I think it's like emblematic of the way that the education system, the higher education system, sort of gives and takes at the same time. And it has images of combating these structural issues, but then centers it on the individual, like you were saying, who can rise up through the ranks. The thing that you do by introducing this idea of 'mode of study,' is really important, because then you can de-center this monolithic idea of education that has one structure that we're cultured into, and then you multiply the ways. You start applying that term, 'mode of study' to things that you wouldn't expect would fall in to the realm of studying.*

Can you talk a little bit about or give some examples of what alternative modes of study are that aren't classroom based hierarchical education?

EM: Yeah, yeah. It's a really expansive term. I got to the term initially from reading something by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. Who talked about this idea of study as something distinct from education. I thought that seemed like an interesting distinction, just to destabilize our taken-for-granted idea that there's one monolithic form of education. I added this term 'modes of study' on the front of study to think about a lot of different ways we study in the world.

You could think of modes of studying happening all the time. I think of study, in a really general way, as just how we pay attention to the world and how our capacities and dispositions for engaging with the world change through our sustained attention. So, it's a really general definition of study, but we can take on different ways of doing that studying, depending on the means of studying that we're using and the goals or ends of studying

that we're aiming for, and also the relations of studying that were engaged in.

I see a particular mode of studying as a combination of certain means of studying or resources for studying and certain relations of studying. So it can be defined in a lot of ways. You can think of modes of studying happening in everyday life. In gardening and cooking together with other people, in reading a book, in doing work, working on your own or with other people. Yeah, there are all kinds of every day modes of studying that we get engaged in.

Then there are also more intentional modes of study that we could see as presenting alternative counter-institutions to education based modes of studying. Some examples that... One would be looking at how indigenous peoples, such as Native American peoples in United States have engaged in their own modes of studying for many centuries, millennia even, different modes of studying for different tribes and nations, of course, but I think looking at Native American and First Nations peoples also in Canada, for example. I think one of my biggest inspirations of a radical alternative mode of studying was from reading the work of Leanne Simpson writing about Nishnaabeg modes of studying in Ontario, a province in Canada or Nishnaabeg people's land dispossessed by the state of Canada, to be exact. But she talks about a mode of studying that's really different from education in a bunch of ways. Principally, that's the kind of studying that is grounded in the relationships between people and the land. Where she sees [that] Nishnaabeg people see the land as itself having agency and non human beings of other kinds also have agency and studying. So there is a kind of reciprocal and overlapping relationship of agency and how people learned from and with the land.

So, this is a way of thinking about studying that destabilizes the idea of an individual formed through education, by breaking the boundaries between the autonomous individual and entities beyond the individual, including the land. And seeing the land itself as striating people's bodies in some ways.

This is the kind of studying that doesn't rely on grades that doesn't rely on an individualized, vertical life trajectory. It doesn't rely on the relationships of governance between an expert teacher and students. These forms of study present pretty radical alternatives to what we're used to in education. These kinds of studying in indigenous communities are intimately bound up with how they live. Their ways of making their lives and their world, they're bound up with indigenous modes of life and they can

serve as ways for resurgence of indigenous modes of life and resistance to settler colonial capitalism. That's one important point I tried to make my book that we should see modes of studying as co-constitutive with certain ways of making the world.

TFSR: *Bringing up Leanne Simpsons work, and the experience of indigenous people in the US and Canada: Leanne Simpson talks about an indigenous science and she's trying to counter the Western ideas of that, but we also have this history of forced assimilation through the boarding schools. It seems like part of this idea of education is a process of assimilation and when you talk about it in relation to migrants who are culturally deprived, they need to be given this culture, this one mono culture.*

We [in the USA] were fed the story that education is a public good and is something that we all should desire and aspire to, but part of the history that you talk about in terms of the education system that we've inherited today, is how education and the form that it takes was a counter revolutionary measure to put down rebellions or even nascent revolutions and form kinds of social compromise. Can you talk a little bit about that history? Of how this form took shape in relationship to people's movements?

EM: Yeah, so I started talking about it with that example of the school dropout narrative, that we could see the development of that narrative as a reaction by liberal capitalists to the civil rights movement and interrelated with the anti-colonial movements internationally that were pushing against liberal capitalism and putting it in crisis. We can see the dropout narrative as a way to de-politicize their struggles and to divert attention away from the critiques they were making of structural racism and also to divert attention away from how those movements were creating alternatives to liberal capitalism, alternative ways of making the world. And also engaging in alternative kinds of studying within their own movements, engaging in horizontalist study groups within the movements that were bound up with their organizing that rely on education. So, that's one example of how an element of education emerges in a counter-revolutionary way.

I can give another example I talked about in my book. You could see levels of schools, something we take for granted today. The levels distinguishing kindergarten first grade through 12th grade is actually a historically constructed institution that emerged in the 13th or 14th century in lower Germany, which is now Netherlands and some parts of Belgium. So, there are these communities of women called Beguines who were engaging

in alternative modes of studying, horizontalist, Women-to-Women study groups in their communities, which were called beguinages. They were are kind of spiritualists convert group that was breaking away from the established church and breaking away from patriarchal family relations they were experiencing in their homes. So these beguinages provided a kind of escape for women to get away from patriarchy, in some ways. But at the same time, the established church and the ruling authorities and cities saw these beguinages as threats to their power, so they narrated stigmatizing stories about the Beguines. They associated them with witchcraft, associated them with evil and demonic forces.

Other groups, other religious or spiritualist congruent groups tried to distinguish themselves from the Beguines so that they wouldn't be associated with the kind of threat that the ruling authorities saw from that group. One of these groups was called 'The Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life.' They had schools associated with their spiritual movement. In these schools, at a certain point, particularly in the context of the Black Plague there were a lot of students coming into their schools and there was a sense of crisis around overcrowding in their schools. So, they instituted levels in their schools as a motive of managing that disorder and crowding in their schools. And this gave them a more hierarchical relationship to studying and they contrasted themselves with the Beguines, who had a more horizontalist way of studying. The the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life justified their levels, or legitimated them through a narrative of what they called 'spiritual ascent.' This kind of ideology of spiritual ascent, where young people are seen as rising up the levels towards a spiritual improvement, higher up. So, school level institution was one of the initial elements of what we know as education today. Though it wasn't called education at the time. The word education wasn't used in Dutch or German, then, not for at least another couple 100 years. It didn't emerge in English until the early 1500s. But, but when it did emerge, they were referring to schools that had levels like that.

Another example of seeing these elements of education as counter revolutionary, is that the word 'education' emerged because ruling classes in 16th century England, early 1500s, were experiencing peasant resistances and King Henry the eighth's regime, had a crisis of legitimacy because of these resistances. The king's advisors were accused of being illegitimate because they're not of noble birth. So they described themselves as educated as a way to legitimate themselves. So that was one of the first public uses of this term of education. They say that they were educated in contrast with

their critics who are uneducated. They associated uneducated people with idleness in contrast with educated people as hard working. That's another counter-revolutionary example of education in its origins.

TFSR: *So when we uncover these histories of education and see the political roots, the racist roots, the settler colonial roots of the system that we're all forced to encounter in some way, it raises this dilemma that you grapple with in the book. How to participate either within and against the institution, beyond the institution, outside of the institution. One thing that you talked about that I really appreciate is being explicitly political which seems to counter this demand that academics are objective, that we can see outside of a situation without taking sides. But in the book you're taking a specific side. That puts into question this cherished notion of academic freedom that's outside of the political spectrum.*

So, I'm just wondering about your thoughts on this call to 'politicize education,' how it interrupts the ideas of the values of education. And also if you want to talk at all about your experience as an educator and also a student who's explicitly political, because that can be difficult to navigate those institutions when you're wearing your politics on your sleeve.

EM: Yeah, these are great questions. I think my experience hasn't been all that successful in trying to do this. I feel like I've been blackballed in some ways from employment as a political science professor. I've heard from one friend that when they saw my application for a job, somebody other job committee said, "Oh, this person is too politically activisty." That led them to put my application in the dustbin. I don't know if I'm great about giving advice about how to navigate these tensions. But I'd say that my call to politicize education can offer some more nuanced frames for thinking about the politics or how we navigate these tensions.

Getting back to what I was saying about how most people writing about universities tend to give crisis narratives and talking about them. I see these crisis narratives as de-politicizing, in a way, because they tend to rely on a moralizing question. In that moralizing, they tend to romanticize certain ideals, like the ideal of education itself, or the ideal of the public university. And in doing that, they shut down / short circuit thinking about how those ideals have themselves emerged out of political struggles, and how the dominant forms that we understand education and the university in were actually contested at the time and people were fighting for alternatives.

Seeing that de-politicizing was what motivated me to introduce this 'modes of study' idea. I think it allows us to think politically about the

terrain of struggle in universities, in all schools, all educational institutions. Think about that terrain struggle in a more nuanced way. Strictly looking at the links between certain modes of study and certain world-making projects or political projects, like seeing a mode of study, mode of studying as bound up with a certain way of making our world where our world includes ourselves, certain ways of making our subjectivities. So with an education-based mode of studying that's tied with mostly individualizing ways of making ourselves. By contrast, we can look at how modes of studying have been bound up with alternative world-making projects in radical movements. For example, I talked about the indigenous modes of study and how those are bound up with indigenous resurgence projects, we can also look at Black radical studying that happened in still happens in Black radical movements from the civil rights movement, Black power movement, to movement for Black lives today.

So one example of that, that I look at is at San Francisco State College in the mid to late 1960s. There was strong Black power movement in the Bay Area and that spread onto the campuses of universities there with Black student union organizing. So the Black Student Union at San Francisco State, they engaged in study groups in their organizing and they connected with radical white students at San Francisco State who were organizing a kind of counter-cultural free university that's called the Experimental College, where they took money from the dominant University and used that money to pay for students to be teachers themselves of other students and setup self organized classes. So the Black Student Union used those resources to organize their own radical classes about Black history, about Black Power organizing and philosophy, and Black arts.

In these classes, they were engaging in a mode of study that was radically different from education in the normal university. They had no grades, they broke down hierarchical relations between students and teachers. Mostly weren't doing them for credit, though some we're doing them for credit, which brings in a kind of important tension: "How do we survive in this capitalist world while simultaneously trying to resist it and create alternatives to it?" I think the question credits is a key one there. So thinking about those histories of struggle within universities, like that Experimental College and the Black Student Movement, Think that drawing on those histories and thinking about how those could be resurrected today in our organizing in relation to universities. I think those examples can open up

some really horizon expanding ways of thinking about these tensions of within and against beyond the University.

TFSR: *Yeah. In your book, in the final chapter, you go into your own experience in a similar kind of project called 'The Experimental College of the Twin Cities' or EXCO. You give an overview of that experience, and then analyze the things that I did well, and the shortcomings that it had. I was wondering if you could give it a little bit of information about what EXCO was, how it arose, what inspired it, and then maybe a little bit also about the pitfalls, the impasses that it encountered along the way?*

EM: Yeah, so the experimental college that I was involved in, we actually didn't know anything about the original Experimental College at San Francisco State. We learned about that, many years later, as I was writing this book. That speaks to how we have some serious problems with gaps in our institutional memory, across the history of struggles at universities. I will say a little about the history of the experimental college I was involved in. So it emerged in 2006, in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, when some students at McAlester College, a liberal arts college in St. Paul were struggling against a shift to a more elitist admissions policy. They wanted to enact an alternative university that would be free and open to anyone as a kind of 'fuck you' to the administration that was making their university more elitist.

I was involved in organizing at the University of Minnesota nearby, mainly in organizing in support of a staff labor union there and organizing a grad student union. And through that, my friends, and I connected with this experimental college and we thought it seemed like a good idea, a good way to kind of prefigure an alternative radical University. So, we created a chapter of it at the University of Minnesota. And we collaborated with students at McAlester. We we used our positions as students to appropriate resources from the dominant universities, we took spaces, we took money from the student government and we use those resources to put on free, open, self-organized classes with no grades. A way to kind of build an alternative University in the cracks of higher education.

We also had classes off campus, trying to break the barriers between universities and communities around them. Through that organizing, we connected with the Spanish speaking Latinx community, mostly in South Minneapolis. Some folks in that community created their own chapter at the experimental college that put on classes on Spanish. So a lot

of the money that we were appropriating from universities we were siphoning into that Latinx, working class-run chapter of the experimental college.

This was a very alternative kind of studying project. We tried to make it relevant for radical movements, there were classes on anarchist reading groups, feminist reading groups, Marxist reading groups, classes on radical pedagogy, decolonization, one really good class was called "unsettling Minnesota", it was about getting non Indigenous settler people to engage with indigenous peoples' modes of world making. So there were many hundreds of great classes that came out of that. Thousands of people got engaged with alternative counter-cultural ideas and projects.

So, I think my modes of study idea can help us see some of the advantages of that project but, I think it can also help us see the limits to projects like that. For example, in these EXCO classes, participants often brought with them habits from education that they had been ingrained to carry, such as expecting to be motivated by grades and expecting the kind of expert relationship from the teachers. I think that played out on how there was a lot of attrition of students. Often classes would start with a lot of people, but they'd end up with very few because students in these classes had to come up with their own motivations for why they're into it. That is a challenge for both students and the facilitators of the classes.

Another big limit that we saw was how this experimental college was grappling with a tension between trying to engage in resistance to the dominant universities, while also creating a radical alternative. In that tension, I think we as organizers of the project often reproduced some of the bureaucratic and patriarchal features of the education system in how we tried to organize it. I think creating a bureaucracy is kind of a shortcut around dealing with the political, ethical issues that are involved in dealing with that tension. And then we fell back on crisis management modes of dealing with their problems, like short circuiting the opportunity to engage in studying the tensions of our own project in a more radical way. The project lasted for 10 years 2006 to 2016. But it dissolved about three years ago.

TFSR: *Yeah, that's a pretty long time for a radical project. At least in this day and age, it seems long, especially when you're facing the issues of burnout that you get in other organizing spaces, too, with all the people being taxed with other duties outside of that school since it's not a source of income and you need to survive.*

This brings me to another question, a problem that comes up. So on one hand, we see educational institutions offer to potentially resisting

or rebellious people as a compromise that brings them into something. The other thing that I feel like we could see and talk about is how the radical innovations and pedagogy and class and organizing at schools can be co-opted by these institutions. From my own experience of teaching in an 'experimental school,' its history is one that just becomes institutionalized. It seems like EXCO, in some way, repeated that because we bear these institutional markings ourselves. To try and summarize my question, if you wanted to talk about the dangers of being co-opted when we put our struggles into innovating education or modes of study, how that can be sucked back into the institutions that we want to destroy or counter?

EM: Yeah, the danger of cooptation and recuperation of our radical resistant subversive energy is always there. This is tricky because I don't think there's any outside position of purity that we could try to occupy. But at the same time, I think we need to be continually vigilant against that kind of recuperation. I think with radical critical kinds of pedagogy, those approaches, theories about them, methods of them, are really easily recuperated into the normal institution. Academia is a machine of recuperation, that's what it's based on. Criticality, radicalness, as a kind of stance is something that people get credit for within the system. There are whole disciplines, some disciplines based on criticality, like this critical university studies field I was talking about, there are now two books series by academic publishers under that title, critical university studies. So somebody can publish a book, and make a career out of being a Critical University Studies scholar.

I think the key is that there are certain limits as to what the system will allow you to push without feeling threatened. I think one of the easiest ways that seemingly-radical ideas or projects are recuperated is through individualizing them through academics, getting individual credit for them. I think one easy antidote to that is to work collectively, ideally collectively in ways that can make your individual identities invisible to the metrics of academic value. So that it's not even a question of who's getting credit for what, again this gets back to the tension about surviving within the system while trying to resist it and do stuff beyond it.

So, I don't know, but I guess my position on that tension, that question has changed a lot since I've felt more and more pushed out of academia. I'm working now as a staff person. I give very few shits about making a name for myself in academia, or anything, or getting credit for things. I think maybe one key tactic is to work with people who are outside of the system, or have been marginalized with the system, and who are existing on

its cracks, not to worry about trying to gain the recognition or collaboration of people who are in more powerful, recognized positions, like tenure track tenured academics.

Some tensions I have been thinking about and there is a new project I'm working on, called 'Abolitionist University Studies." I was trying to take a different approach to universities from the critical university studies that we're used to. I've been doing that collectively with some other people. I find it a lot more fun convivial to work collaboratively on these kinds of projects. Pretty much everything I've written has been collaborative, except for this book.

TFSR: *That was where I was gonna go next. This idea of an abolitionist university that you talked about in that book, you mentioned it, but it's also something that you've written about with others elsewhere. I just love the sound of that as a teacher and an abolitionist. So I was just wondering if you could give a little sense of what that might mean, an "Abolitionists University," in addition to collective work that doesn't look for the same individual rewards and careers that an academic would. But what else does an abolitionist University mean?*

EM: This is a really open question. I'm just spit-balling some ideas here. It's more of a question right now. What should an abolitionists university be? I've been talking about this and writing about this with three friends: Abby Boggs, Nick Mitchell and Zach Schwartz Weinstein. We wrote what we call an 'invitation to abolitionist university studies.' You can check it out at the website: Abolition.University.

Picking up on the prison abolitionist movement today, I've been involved in organizing locally here in Durham, North Carolina, and some prison abolition organizing, working in solidarity with people incarcerated at the local jail here for the last three years. So, I'm kind of coming at it from that practical experience in prison abolition, organizing and asking the question, 'what would it look like to bring the vector of that movement on to university campuses themselves?' This abolitionist vector is brought into K to 12 school organizing a lot already, especially with organizing against the schools and prison nexus. Like trying to get cops kicked off of schools. That's also been happening at university campuses too, trying to kick cops off campuses. I think until now, that idea of abolitionism in the universities hasn't really been theorized in a coherent, affirmative way yet.

The right wing has brought that idea of abolitionism towards universities. Think about how conservatives have called for abolishing

universities because they see them as dens of leftist thought. So I think it's important to distinguish between right wing and left wing abolitionism, and to see abolitionism as a kind of terrain of struggle, one that the right is winning in some ways. The group that is the most popular abolitionist themed group on Facebook now is a right wing group. It's the abolish human abortion movement, the pro-life movement. They see themselves in the legacy of abolitionism by analogizing unborn fetuses with enslaved Black people. You can see that tension within abolitionism going back to the early anti slavery days, with some anti-slavery activists being anti Black, calling for enslaved people to be sent to Africa, for example.

In picking up abolitionism from a left wing perspective, especially from prison and police abolitionists perspective, also border abolitionism, capitalism abolitionism, thinking about that in relationship to universities, we ask what that could mean. For this question, one of our main arguments is that we need a different historical perspective on the university, different from what critical university studies people have done. Most critical university studies start with the post-World War II university, and they give a kind of romanticized nostalgic longing for that mass government-supported University. Instead, we should take the timeline back a lot further. We should start with how universities in the US were initially bound up with slavery and settler colonialism. There has been a lot of work on that. A bunch of universities have been grappling with that history through these institutional self reckoning projects. But often the way these projects turned out, they tend to serve as another means of valorizing institution itself by saying, 'Okay, we're taking ownership of this history, we're reckoning with it, we're sorry, and now we've dealt with it. Now, this is great PR for our university. Come study and work with us!' So instead, we're trying to take up a more threatening approach to that history.

In particular, we argue that we need to look at what happened to universities after the Civil War, especially after the formal emancipation of enslaved people. What was the function that universities served. We talked about what we call the 'Post Slavery University,' not in the sense that slavery was actually really abolished, though it was formally abolished, but as prison abolitionists have argued, slavery took other forms such as prisons and racist policing, racialized divisions of labor and racial capitalism. So, we say 'what was the role of universities in this new form of racial capitalism, particularly in the Counter Reconstruction period and on?' We see universities at that point in the late 1800s, as taking on the role of helping capitalists accumulate or picking up on the accumulative capacities that were

lost with the abolition of slavery. When capitalists couldn't extract free labor from enslaved people, they needed to find new means of accumulation. Universities served several roles for that as a kind of alternative means of accumulation. Such as through the Moral Land Grant Act, using universities to dispossess land from enslaved people, for building campuses, also selling that land to fund campuses in the East Coast. Universities also served to create racial science that was used to justify racialized labor hierarchies and gendered science and also to develop forms of scientific agriculture. They were used to improve the efficiency of agriculture without enslaved people and have more scientific forms of labor management.

So we ask what accumulative functions has the university served at different stages throughout history up to now? I think tracing those accumulative functions up to the present, we can find more nuanced, deeper, radical ways of understanding what we need to resist at universities and who our accomplices could be in university struggles today.

TFSR: *That actually raises a question for me about the function of prison education programs. This is a question I have just about how those could function from an abolitionist perspective versus how they can function as a continuation of the extraction or assimilation or forms of social control. Do you have any thoughts on what prison education programs offer to people who are incarcerated and also how institutions use them?*

EM: I haven't engaged in a prison education practice myself, so I can't speak too deeply from that experience. I know there's some great writing on it by Gillian Harkins and Erica Meiners, I can recommend. It's called the Beyond Crisis: College in Prison through the Abolition Undercommons, where they talk about these tensions. I think it's a really important question. It seems really difficult to try to grapple with those tensions of how to engage in studying with incarcerated people without recuperating their efforts into an educationist projects of shaping them as obedient discipline subjects and also the tensions around avoiding having your own work as a prison educator recuperated into a careerist project that just valorizes the institution and your own position in it.

Maybe my modes of study concept could be useful. If prison educators picked up that framing to think about how whatever studying practices you're engaged in with incarcerated people either reproduce or break away from the elements of education based mode of study. That could be helpful for thinking about how on a micro tactical level, how you could try

to avoid that recuperative work while resisting and creating alternatives. I'm not sure though, I haven't tried that but it's possibly useful.

TFSR: *That was a little bit of a digression. So, for my last question I want to return to this idea of a 'terrain of struggle' and ask you kind of bluntly: 'What do you think the university offers and artists as a terrain of struggle to engage with?'*

EM: It's a good questions. It's a tricky question. Because universities have a lot of resources that could be used for studying. And from that perspective, I think universities offer an important terrain for anarchists to try to appropriate, steal, recuperate those resources for their own projects. But at the same time, another question to ask is, 'why do we consider the resources for studying that universities control? Why do we consider those resources the best sort of resources for studying?' I think there's a question of why some things are seen as studying resources, like classrooms, like computers, like professors, professors labor power. I think the way that the education system has been institutionalized, we might have limited our imaginative horizons of what are the best studying resources. So, there's a tension there. I'm not really sure, it's an open question for me about whether it's worthwhile to engage with universities for their resources.

This is Audre Lorde's question about using the masters tools to tear down the Masters House. Maybe they're useful. Maybe not. Maybe they need some other tools. Maybe the tools can be appropriated and used for other purposes than what they're meant for. Maybe it's not worth the effort. I'm not sure.

I think maybe to ask that question in a little more nuanced way we could ask about anarchists who already have some relationship with universities. Speaking for myself as someone who's been socialized into university after studying and working in different ones for like twenty years, I feel somewhat stuck in relationship to it. It's hard to get other kinds of jobs and be skilled in some ways. So for those of us who have some kind of strong relationship with universities already, I think it is worthwhile to engage with them in ways that allow us to open them up for struggles. Especially to try to connect with people who work at them, who are resisting already, and engaging in alternative, radical studying practices already, especially people who are working in the most marginalized and exploited positions: racialized staff, maintenance workers, student workers, for example. It's important to break down the distinction between the university and the

surrounding community and see how surrounding communities are already infiltrating the university every day.

TFSR: *Yeah. I guess what you're saying is like thinking about how the university itself isn't just academics, there's other kinds of labor that are going on there that often get overlooked. I'm going to try this question one other way and see, just because I want to know what your hope is, for struggles being born out of the university as a place. There is a history of radical movements that gets sparked from university struggles like May '68 in France, or we can even think about the struggles that ended up with Black studies departments in the US.*

So given the terrain that we have today, how much optimism or hope do you have in struggles coming out of the university?

EM: I say not much hope. But at least for those historical examples, I think the movements first started off outside of campuses and then came on to campuses to try to appropriate their resources. More recently with big movements like movement for Black lives. That movement started off of campuses, and then many months later came on campuses. I think looking to the history of universities, most radical transformation of them, has come from struggles that started off campus and then took a form on campus through students or workers who took the vector of those outside movements and brought it in to the universities. I guess they don't have any hope, but maybe I'm distorting your question there. Does that makes sense?

TFSR: *Yeah. I guess what you're saying is just that we need to be mindful the fact that whatever movements do happen on campus are like a transfer from movements that happen off campus, either the movements bring their struggle to campus to take resources, or the students on campus get involved in an external struggle and then bring that struggle onto campus in their own immediate surroundings.*

EM: Yeah. For example, this abolitionists university studies, this idea of a movement that is really currently just imaginary of what a movement could be. This idea comes from the prison abolitionist movement, which is mostly off of campuses. So if it were to be come a bigger movement, I think its center of gravity would be with, or its initiating inspiration would be with incarcerated people struggles in prisons and with the families of

incarcerated people struggles outside. If we see how, with the State repression of the Black liberation movement of the '60s and '70s, how that state repression pushed some of the most radical people into prisons, how more riots have taken place in prisons in the US than outside since then. I think we see the initiating inspiration for the abolitionist university movement as necessarily tied with incarcerated people's movements, for example.

TFSR: *That makes a lot of sense, getting another idea of what abolitionists university could mean. I guess just to close it out I want to see if you want to talk about any other projects that you're working on, or any thing that you want to plug people into for ways that they can engage with the work that you're doing, with the abolitionist university or otherwise?*

EM: Yeah, so for the Abolitionist University Studies, information about it is at this Abolition.University website. I'm also involved in a project called Abolition, A Journal of Insurgent Politics and we're helping organize a gathering that's going to happen in Toronto in early May, 2020. That gathering is going to be around bringing together decolonization and abolitionist movements and other kinds of radical movements. The theme is imagining abolitionist and decolonizing futures. That's going to be pretty powerful event, I think. There's information about that at AbolitionJournal.org.

So those are some projects I'm working on. I'm also doing a history project on Duke University itself, looking at its intertwinement with tobacco industry, racial capitalism, settler colonialism. That's a kind of project I'm working on in the future trying to do a kind of multi university project to work with other people who are at other universities that have that kind of tobacco / University entangled history. Yes, those are some projects coming up.

TFSR: *Those events on really exciting. Thanks for sharing them. It'll be great to see what that pulls together.*

I just want to thank you again for taking the time to talk and share your ideas with us and get into the nitty gritty of education.

EM: Thank you. This is a great conversation.

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